



**Testimony  
Of**

**The Honorable Bob Young  
Mayor of Augusta, Georgia**

**On behalf of  
The United States Conference of Mayor**

**Before the House Subcommittee on Water Resources  
and the Environment**

**On H.R. 135  
“The Twenty-First Century Water Commission Act of 2003”**

**June 4, 2003**

## **Introduction**

On behalf of the U.S. Conference of Mayor's Urban Water Council I would like to commend and thank Representative Linder, Representative Calvert, Representative Duncan and Representative Shuster for introducing H.R. 135, the "*Twenty First Century Water Commission Act of 2003*".

My purpose here today is to provide the Committee with some information I have gathered as Co-Chairman of the Urban Water Council, holding meetings with other Mayors around the nation for the last few years. Undoubtedly, water supply issues have surged to the forefront of urban problems. The variety of types of water supply problems, as well as their severity is striking. Of the many water supply problems we have encountered in our Council deliberations, I would like to focus on three of them in this testimony.

### **Augusta, Georgia – Interbasin Transfers**

Some of the more contentious arguments between governments have been over access to water. Years of rapid development, coupled with significant drought, have forced communities to look beyond their own boundaries for new sources of water, sometimes at the expense of neighboring cities.

The premise of interbasin transfers is that a watershed with excess supply will be tapped to subsidize a shortage of water in a neighboring watershed. Such an approach penalizes regions which apply good planning and smart growth principles and rewards communities that grow and expand without regard to whether existing water supplies will support the development.

There are, for example in Georgia, currently no transfers of water out of the Savannah River basin. The supply of water is more than adequate to support current and future development within the basin. However, the neighboring Chattahoochee basin has been strained to support the explosive growth in Metropolitan Atlanta.

Existing water management policy in Georgia allows for interbasin transfers. A recent attempt to permit such a transfer involving 12 million gallons per day (12-MGD) from the Savannah basin to the Chattahoochee basin was vigorously fought by Savannah basin communities. The issue never reached the boiling point, because the permit application was later abandoned. However, the General Assembly responded with a bill to discourage interbasin transfers and to limit such transfers to counties adjacent to the neighboring watershed.

While local governments may be able to work with state governments on watershed management issues the same is not true when other states get involved. This is especially the case when watersheds incorporate state lines. Cross-border communities are virtually helpless when it comes to influencing the legislative and administrative process in another state. Recent experience involving the Potomac River and the contention engendered by Virginia's plan to withdraw more water while Maryland objects, is another example of what is in store for many communities.

Federal guidance on what I call "interstate water" is sorely needed before interbasin transfer wars erupt. Guidance, however, should be weighted toward protecting the rights of the local communities over water resources in their watershed. Guidance should also include a responsibility for proper planning of water resource utilization. If

one basin takes water from another basin, then the basin losing the water resources will have to face development restrictions because the basin taking the water has failed to do so.

### **Albuquerque, New Mexico**

Albuquerque is host to about 450,000 residents and is situated next to the Rio Grande River. While it is next to a major river and has groundwater resources it still relies on transfer of water from the San Juan River in Colorado. Albuquerque's problems illustrate just how tangled and complex water issues can be. Mayor Martin Chavez has characterized the difficulty in securing current and future water supplies as a high stakes case.

Currently, the city relies on an aquifer that could be depleted in 20 years if it is pumped at current rates. Facing the toughest drought in decades and pending depletion of the aquifer, the city is now looking to rely predominantly on surface water supplies. The water is already available, but an endangered species- the 3-inch silvery minnow has placed that supply in jeopardy for its intended use.

While the city is next to the Rio Grande River it has never obtained an allotment from the River. A 1930's water rights agreement divided the water up among Colorado, New Mexico, Mexico and Texas; and it is oversubscribed. Albuquerque contracted water from the San Juan River in Colorado in an effort to line up future supplies as the local aquifer would draw-down over time. The San Juan River water was re-channelled to the Chama River in New Mexico; and in a 1962 agreement with the Army Corps of Engineers it was stored by the Heron Dam. The city has purchased the rights to over 48,000 acre feet per year.

The city used groundwater and leased rights to the San Juan water to area farmers. That could come to an end with an extended drought. Not only will local farmers be at risk, the city residents could be too because the critical habitat of the silvery minnow in the Rio Grande is at risk due to low flow. To save the fish, Albuquerque might have to give up its rights to the water behind the dam in order to increase flow for the minnow. In fact, a Federal Court ordered 10,000 acre feet from Albuquerque's annual allotment to be released into the Rio Grande specifically for the silvery minnow.

Seven states, including New Mexico, have gone to the Court over the ruling to petition that the water be reserved for people. Albuquerque is not indifferent to the plight of the silvery minnow. In fact the city has undertaken projects and programs to preserve and enhance their critical habitat. Yet, environmentalists, the U.S. Department of the Interior and the city and states have all squared off in a legal confrontation that may well establish precedent in the struggle for water rights.

### **The Cities of Tampa and St. Petersburg, Florida**

The Tampa area water system is serviced by the Tampa Bay Water Authority (TBW). TBW provides the water supply for the two cities and surrounding communities. TBW services approximately 2 million people in their service area. The area has historically relied on ground water for its supply. Increasing development has stressed the groundwater aquifer to the point where legal action has required the communities to slow down the aquifer draw-down, and find other water supplies, for example surface water resources.

The geographical area that the surrounding communities are situated in is bounded by the Tampa Bay and the Atlantic Ocean. Reliance on groundwater grew not only because the aquifer contained high quality water, but also because the amount of available open land has been limited for some time. The opportunity to develop and utilize surface water reservoirs is limited in this area. Although development of surface water supplies is necessary, TBW turned to desalination technology as part of the solution to provide an adequate and dependable water supply.

TBW contracted in 1999 to begin construction of a 25-MGD desalination plant. The plan calls for expanding the plant to 35-MGD after five years in order to keep up with water demand in light of limitations on the groundwater supply. The plant also requires construction of a 14 mile interconnection pipe to the existing water distribution network.

The desalination project is forward thinking. The briny water supply in the Tampa Bay is a huge water resource. Past experience with desalination technology resulted in the cost to produce potable water as a limiting factor. Like many coastal communities around the nation, the cost for traditional water supplies has risen to the point where desalination technology is now very competitive. For example, TBW officials have indicated that current water supplies cost roughly \$3/1,000 gallons to produce, while the desalination plant is expected to produce water at close to \$2/1,000 gallons. Cost savings from the project are anticipated to be worth \$300 million over a 30-year period.

## **Discussion**

I want to thank the Committee again for inviting me to share these views. Anything we can do to emphasize the importance of water resources in an era of scarcity is important. Water is a valuable public resource and we need to treat it as such. We need to better understand the nation's water situation in order to make good public policy decisions.

What these cases illustrate is that scarcity breeds competition for water resources, and some cities are less able to deal effectively with that competition than others. While Augusta and Albuquerque will continue to struggle with these issues because they are extremely complex, cities like Tampa and St. Petersburg have taken great strides to redefine fresh water from salt water resources. Not all cities can tap into estuaries, bays and oceans for an alternative supply.

One thing in common for all of the cases I have seen in my tenure as Co-Chairman of the Urban Water Council is that there is lack of recognition of the seriousness of the water supply problem; and, there is a lack of effective planning to use current water resources more efficiently and effectively. The federal government can play a lead role in the form of technical assistance to achieve the needed level of planning so that American cities and states, neighboring watersheds, and the network of rivers can be made to meet our economic and cultural needs. The "The Twenty-First Century Water Commission Act of 2003" is a step in the right direction.

**The Urban Water Council**  
**A Task Force of The U.S. Conference of Mayors**

The UWC is open to all Mayors, and functions like a USCM task force – providing Mayors with a focal point for discussion of issues impacting how cities provide and protect water and wastewater services to the community. The UWC has, and will continue to develop positions on Federal legislation, regulations and policy. The UWC will continue to act through the USCM Environment Committee, and other Committees, as appropriate, to propose and adopt resolutions on water related matters.